



Eight Principles to Transform Care for Young People in the Justice System

We all want a world where young people — no matter their race, ethnicity, gender or neighborhood — can realize their potential, even when they make mistakes and violate the law in serious ways.

Building a world where all young people are able to thrive and grow into responsible adults, requires us to respond more effectively when young people experience harm and when they offend. Instead of using concrete cells and barbed wire to intimidate and control young people in prison-like settings, we would provide young people with steady **relationships with caring adults**.

We would have **effective community responses**, including options that keep some kids away from the justice system altogether. We would work to create a continuum of options where young people would find **guidance and support networks in their own communities** that connect them to education and job skills and help them repair the harm they've caused to others.

We'd have strategies that are powerful enough to **dismantle generations of structural racism** that has put young people of color at a disadvantage and deprived their communities of important resources. Our new world would **heal** young people who have been exposed to traumatizing violence.

But building this new world with the right programs and responses takes time — and young people experiencing youth corrections today can't wait. How do we make progress toward this vision while helping the 43,000 young people who are in custody **today**, who are disproportionately and overwhelmingly youth of color?

It starts with **eight principles** that every juvenile justice system should embrace **right now**, even as they plan for the future. To get to that future, states, counties or cities must dramatically reduce confinement and build stronger community-centered responses. At the same time they must elevate the standard of care for youth in custody. These principles can **accelerate progress** on both fronts by advancing public safety through restorative responses and helping systems and communities do better by young people.

1. **Lead with values that promote well-being and equity.** Leadership and staff working with young people have to demonstrate that they believe **all** youth deserve a happy, healthy and productive future, no matter their race or ethnicity. That includes being aware of how chronic trauma may have affected the lives of youth in systems and responding in appropriate, caring ways that promote healing and resilience.
2. **Maintain a healing and safe environment.** Make sure the space reflects these values, physically and emotionally. It should have natural light, inviting and warm color schemes and pictures. In place of gray

walls, windowless rooms and caged-in recreational spaces typical of many correctional designs, secure settings would include places to relax and learn and separate space for therapeutic conversation.

3. **Develop staff to excel in building positive and supportive relationships.** Staff must be able to guide young people through transformation. Leaders have an obligation to support this skill development. When staff are happy, enjoy working with youth and feel safe, de-escalation and conflict resolution seem natural. A mutual respect is evident.
4. **Provide plentiful and purposeful programming.** The science is clear: Young people are in a period of rapid learning, growth and heightened curiosity. Instead of being idle or watching television for most of the day, their days should be filled with engaging and purposeful activities that tap their curiosity, teach them valuable skills and offer opportunities to lead.
5. **Ground service delivery, staff training and organizational culture in knowledge of adolescent development and strengths.** Research shows young people respond best to approaches that build on their strengths, develop a positive sense of themselves at a critical time of brain development and make space for their voices. Effective approaches offer choices and incentives that encourage positive behavior.
6. **Treat family members as essential partners in planning for young people's long-term success.** Young people placed in secure settings or otherwise living outside their homes should have plenty of opportunities to maintain meaningful contact with the people they consider to be their family — whether or not they are biologically related. Family and caregivers should be consulted in decisions concerning their children, such as planning for treatment and what happens when the young person returns home.
7. **Encourage community connections.** Community organizations and people who have been through the system themselves often have credibility with young people who are hard to reach. They should be trained as mentors, welcomed into facilities and encouraged to participate in activities. These partnerships can promote healing, build social and emotional skills and develop hobbies. Also, they may open doors for jobs and internships.
8. **Incorporate continuous quality improvement.** As leadership and staff strive to improve the well-being of young people in their care, quantitative data and input from young people, families and community members should tell them how they're doing. The information they collect should be in service of doing better.

Juvenile justice system leaders, researchers and advocates across the country agree that with these principles, we can promote **both community safety and youth well-being** — for a better today and a much brighter future.

We can help young people in custody to get on the right track while we work toward an end to the youth prison model. **Learn more** at www.aecf.org.